

Understand Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) develops in some people after they have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence, or serious injury.

Persons with PTSD have intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience that last long after the traumatic event has ended. They may relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares. They may experience sadness, fear, or anger. They may feel detached or estranged from other people. They may avoid situations and places that remind them of the traumatic event. They may react strongly to loud noises, an abrupt touch, and other factors in the environment that trigger the startle response.

A diagnosis of PTSD requires exposure to a traumatic event. However, the exposure can be indirect, as through learning of the violent death of a close family member or friend. It can also occur as the result of repeated exposure to horrible details of trauma such as police officers exposed to details of child abuse cases.

Symptoms

1. **Intrusion.** Intrusive thoughts such as repeated, involuntary memories; distressing dreams; or flashbacks of the traumatic event. Flashbacks may be so vivid that people may believe that they are re-living the traumatic experience or seeing it in front of them.

2. **Avoidance.** Avoiding reminders of the traumatic event; may include people, places, objects, activities, and situations that may trigger distressing memories. People may try to avoid thinking about or remembering the traumatic event. They may resist talking about what happened or how they feel about it.

3. **Alterations in Cognitions and Mood.** Inability to remember important aspects of the traumatic event; negative thoughts or feelings leading to ongoing distorted beliefs about oneself or others (“I am bad”); distorted thoughts about the cause or consequence of the event leading to wrongly blame oneself or other; ongoing fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame; decreased interest in activities previously enjoyed; feeling detached or estranged from others; or being unable to feel happy or satisfied.



4. Alterations in Arousal and Reactivity. Being overly watchful of one's surroundings in a suspicious way; being irritable or having angry outbursts; behaving in a reckless or self-destructive way; being easily startled; having difficulty concentrating or sleeping.

Many people who are exposed to a traumatic event, experience symptoms like these following a traumatic event. For a diagnosis of PTSD, the symptoms must last for more than a month and cause significant distress or impairments in daily functioning. (Symptoms that begin earlier may be diagnosed as a related disorder, Acute Stress Disorder.) Symptoms often develop within 3 months of the traumatic event, but they may occur much later and persist for months and sometimes for years. PTSD may occur with depression, substance abuse, and other mental and physical health disorders.



Treatment for PTSD

Psychotherapy has been shown to be highly effective in the treatment of PTSD. Psychotherapy can provide you with the tools to cope with intrusive thoughts, feel less anxious, and be less reactive to triggers. It is important to work with a therapist who is experienced in working with individuals with PTSD and the types of therapy demonstrated to be most effective in treatment. It is also important to appreciate the multi-faceted nature of PTSD, including the impact on interpersonal relationships and the need to include this consideration in interventions.



Useful Resources for PTSD:

Sidran Institute: www.sidran.org

National Center for PTSD <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

Free Phone Apps:

PTSD Coach
STAIR Coach
CPT Coach

Dr. Gordon has over 25 years of experience assisting individuals with PTSD. If you would like to consult with Dr. Gordon about psychotherapy or assessment for PTSD, please contact us at (512) 496-5947 or sgordon@calmpsychologist.com.

